

ADVANCED PLACEMENT IN RURAL PLACES

Rural Schools Turn to Distance Learning, Virtual Schools for Rigorous Courses

In many small, rural schools, offering Advanced Placement courses simply isn't cost-effective. The lack of Advanced Placement courses in nearly half of our nation's high schools puts many students at a competitive disadvantage in college preparation. States are using online learning to help fill the void and give all students an opportunity to take rigorous AP courses to prepare them for college.

By Tim Weldon

Students at Madison Central High School in Richmond, Ky., get plenty of opportunities to enroll in rigorous Advanced Placement—or AP—classes to help them prepare for college-level coursework and perhaps earn college credits while still enrolled in high school. This year the school offers 13 AP courses, including calculus, music theory, English III and IV, Latin literature, and French and Spanish language.

Travel just 20 miles to the southeast and it's a different story. Estill County High School, a rural school with 750 students, doesn't offer any AP courses. But that doesn't mean Estill County students can't take AP courses. Those students have access to more than 20 AP courses through the Web-based Kentucky Virtual High School. Christine Powell, Kentucky's director of virtual learning, said the virtual school levels the playing field for all students, whether they go to a large urban high school, one in a suburb, or a small high school in an isolated part of the state.

"We want to make sure all our kids have access to these courses, no matter where they live in Kentucky; no matter how much money they make, no matter what the color of their skin is,

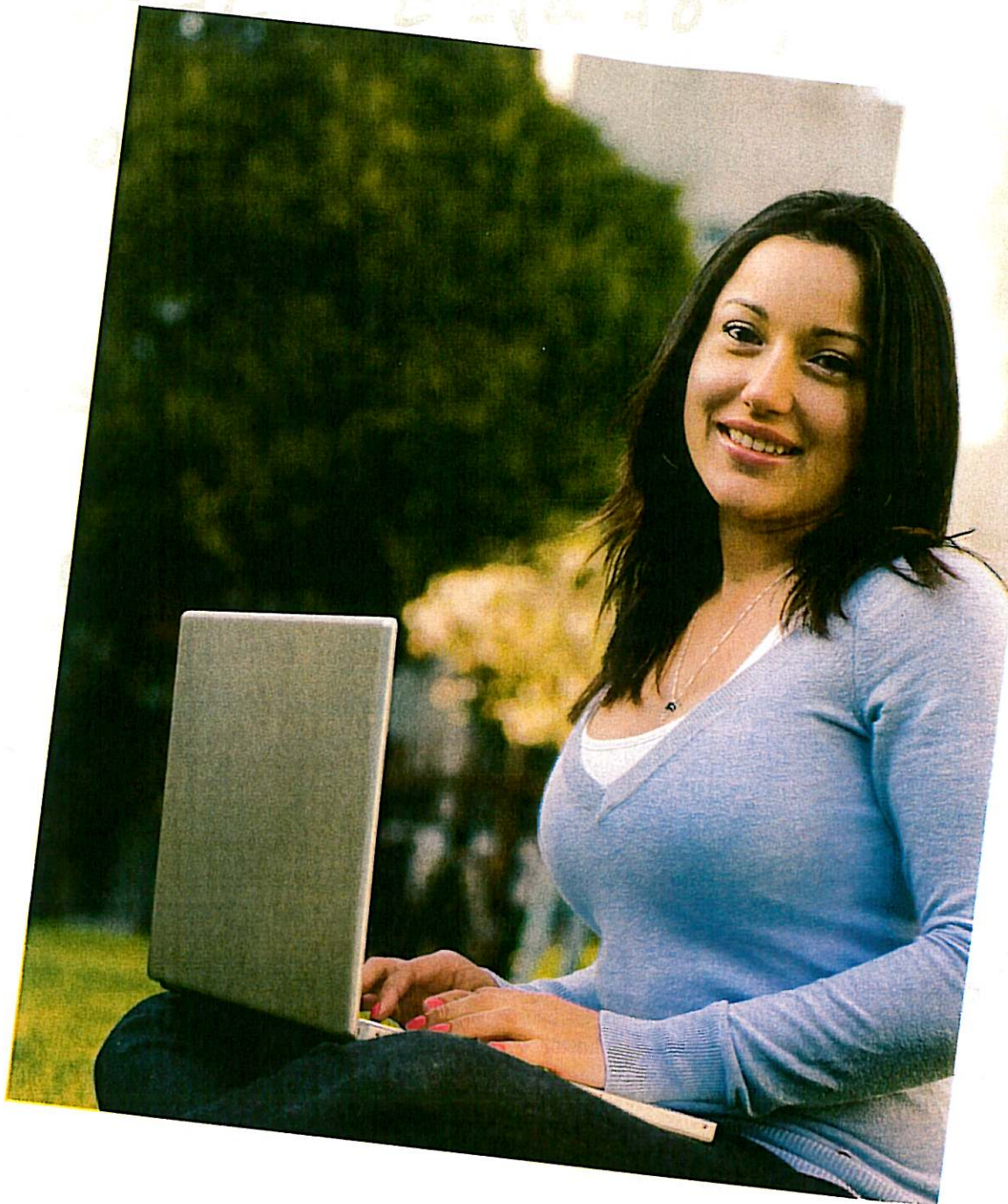
it shouldn't matter," she said. "They should all have access to the same courses."

A 2002 Kentucky law, K.R.S. 160.348, requires high schools to offer students college credit-based courses, including AP classes. Many rural high schools, however, are too small to justify offering an AP class for a few students. Rural school districts also face special challenges recruiting qualified teachers to teach AP courses. Consequently, the law permits AP courses to be offered through the Kentucky Virtual High School or other online alternatives.

Distance Learning Bug Spreads

Kentucky's Estill County is far from being alone in the lack of teacher-led AP courses. More than 40 percent of all high schools in the U.S. fail to offer any of these rigorous courses, according to the U.S. Department of Education. So many school districts are relying on online AP courses taught through so-called distance learning.

Distance learning is used at all levels, from K-12 to postsecondary for a variety of courses. Distance learning is a bit unusual because students and teachers never see each other like they do



in a traditional classroom. They communicate entirely via the computer.

All AP programs, including those offered through distance learning, must be certified by The College Board, which administers the AP program. Trevor Packer, The College Board's vice-president for Advanced Placement, said the quality of AP courses taught through online programs is often superior to those in traditional teacher-led classes.

"These organizations that create online courses typically have the cream of the crop in terms of the teachers they select," Packer explained. "These organizations, in order to be successful, go after very reputable and distinguished teachers."

Nationally, the number of distance learning AP programs has been increasing, although they still account for a small percentage of the total number of AP courses taught. Nationally, more than 17,000 high school students reported taking AP exams after tak-

ing distance learning AP courses.

That's just 1.1 percent of the total number of AP exams in 2008, according to College Board data.

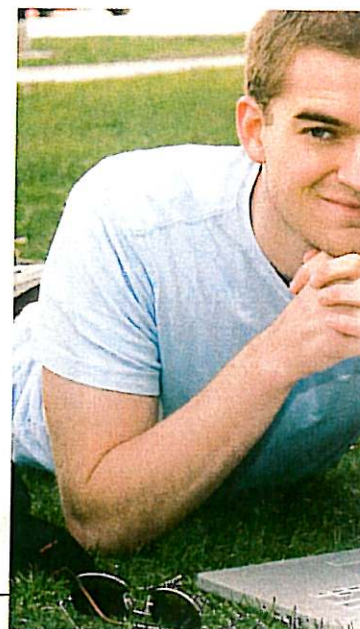
Susan Patrick, president and CEO of the International Association of K-12 Online Learning, said only 32 states offer "significant supplemental online learning programs that offer a state virtual school or online courses purchased through private vendors." In the remaining states, individual districts may make arrangements for students to take online AP courses through private vendors or the students may register for them on their own. Still, more than one-third of the states lack a comprehensive system to deliver students AP courses through distance learning.

Florida Weighs Virtual and Face-to-Face

Florida's Virtual School is the nation's largest supplemental online program, and it's on track to become even larger. House Bill

“... (Distance learning) can be really useful for particular purposes, but it’s not going to ... replace having the traditional teacher-student interaction course.”

—Matthew Irvin, distance learning project director
National Research Center on Rural Education Support



7067, enacted by the legislature in 2008, requires every school district in Florida to offer online learning programs by this school year. The bill is included in the 2010 volume of *Suggested State Legislation* from The Council of State Governments.

Sharon Johnston used to teach AP English literature in Florida. Now she’s the senior associate for the AP program offered through the state’s virtual school. In 2008, more than 2,500 students enrolled in 10 AP courses offered through the school, which was founded in 1997 by two Florida school districts. Today Florida’s Virtual School operates under the guidance of a board of trustees, created by the Florida legislature in 2000. The governor appoints the board’s seven members.

In addition to overseeing the system’s virtual teachers, each of whom works with an average of at least 100 students, Johnston also works part-time as one of the distance learning AP teachers, a radical departure from days when she typically taught 30 students in a single AP class.

“I like both mediums. They both work,” Johnston says. “What I like about the online (instruction) is the individualized approach. I can work with students one student at a time and see where that student’s learning is.”

Johnston said last year students in Florida were more likely to pass the AP exam after taking an AP course through the virtual school than through a traditional class. The percentage of Florida students receiving passing AP scores (3 or higher out of a possible 5 points) was 55.3 percent for students enrolled in a virtual school AP course, compared to 42.5 percent in traditional AP classes.

But only slightly more than half of the 2,527 students enrolled in online AP courses in Florida actually took the AP exam. Consequently, earlier this year, Florida’s Virtual School implemented a new policy that all students who enroll in AP courses through distance learning must take the AP exam.

The number of students taking AP courses through Florida’s Virtual School has been increasing, more than doubling between 2003 and 2006. Florida appropriates per-pupil funding,

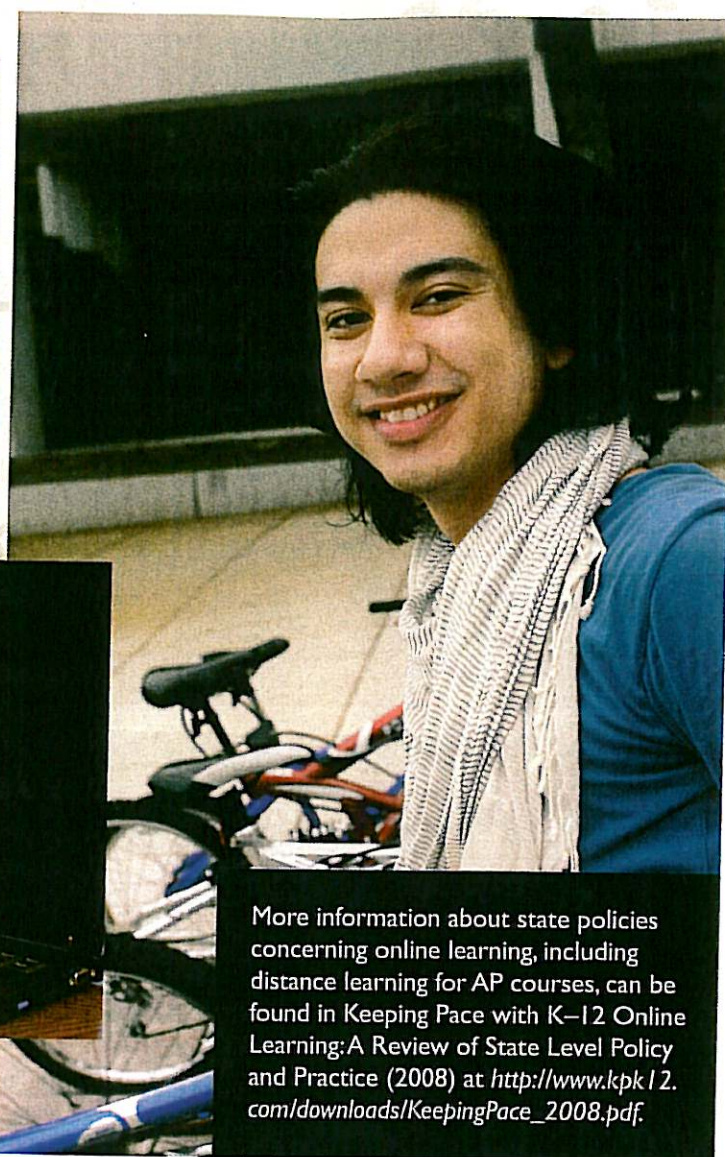
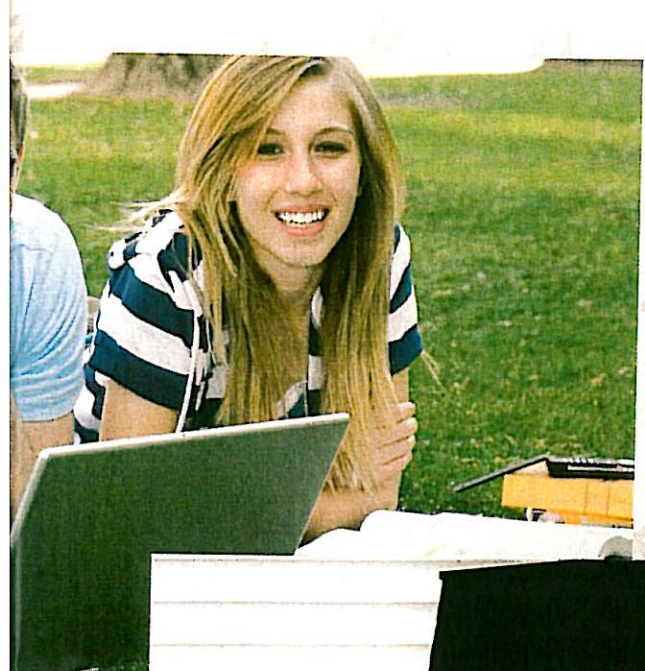
based on students completing the AP course. Florida’s Virtual School is funded based on the number of students enrolled and contingent upon successful completion of the course. Last year, Florida’s legislature budgeted approximately \$1.1 million to Florida’s Virtual School, or \$440 per course taken. Schools pay nothing for their students to enroll in AP courses offered by Florida’s Virtual School. Johnston said it’s a much more economical system than for a school district to pay an AP teacher for a course with a small number of students.

Virtual Virginia

Distance learning is also nothing new in Virginia. Students in rural Virginia schools had access to it as early as 1987, when the General Assembly authorized the Electronic Classroom Program. At that time, the courses were broadcast on television. Only in the past three years has Virginia turned to Internet-based AP courses. With the new technology, Virtual Virginia, a program within the Virginia Department of Education, was created, and last year provided more than 1,500 students in the state with 23 AP courses, plus foreign language and some elective courses.

As with most distance learning programs, students learn through a combination of text lessons, video segments and online discussions. Schools are urged to give students time during the school day to take their online AP courses, rather than expect them to complete the courses after school and on weekends, according to Elmer Steward, instructional supervisor for Virtual Virginia.

Schools provide a mentor, a study area and a computer as well as textbooks, lab materials and software for the student. The state legislature provides Virtual Virginia with a flat appropriation regardless of the number of students enrolled. Schools also pay Virtual Virginia a floating fee based on the school system’s ability to pay. Districts typically pay between \$75 and \$300 for each AP course taken online. Additionally, students who qualify as Early College Scholars may take online AP courses free of charge for the district.



More information about state policies concerning online learning, including distance learning for AP courses, can be found in *Keeping Pace with K–12 Online Learning: A Review of State Level Policy and Practice* (2008) at http://www.kpk12.com/downloads/KeepingPace_2008.pdf.

Teachers communicate with students online both one-on-one and in small groups. Students also work independently with course materials and complete assignments made by the teacher. “And the teacher’s role is to see that the students understand the material, to give the students feedback on the work that they’re doing, to facilitate the students’ understanding of the course material,” Steward explained.

The average AP score for students taking AP exams through Virtual Virginia courses was slightly lower than the state’s average in 2008. While the state’s AP average score was 2.78, the average among Virtual Virginia students was 2.71.

No One Right Answer for Every State

One thing experts in distance learning seem to agree on is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to distance learning.

“Everybody makes the assumption that all online instruction is the same, and it’s not,” Steward said. He suggests policy-makers interested in developing AP distance learning programs look at various models, determine which ones provide the best quality instruction and build a program that encourages the best procedures.

But while research suggests students taking AP courses

online score as well as those taking AP classes in a teacher-led classroom, some experts contend that distance learning should not always be considered a reliable replacement for a traditional AP class.

Matthew Irvin is the distance learning project director for the National Research Center on Rural Education Support, based at the University of North Carolina. While he applauds the use of distance learning programs, he said they have limitations.

“I think people recognize that it’s not a panacea. The distance between the kids and the teachers can be problematic at times,” Irvin said. “So I think we realize that (distance learning) can be really useful for particular purposes, but it’s not going to ... replace having the traditional teacher-student interaction course.”

Rural states typically have fewer students taking AP courses than more populated ones. For example, more than 35 percent of students in New York and Maryland took at least one AP course in 2007, while fewer than 6 percent of students in Louisiana and only slightly more than 10 percent of students in North Dakota, Alabama and Mississippi took one, according to The College Board.

—Tim Weldon is an education policy analyst for The Council of State Governments.



Schools Turn to Private Vendors for AP Instruction

When Clay Baker attended Mediapolis High School in southeastern Iowa, his 2005 graduating class had only 60 students. With so few students, the school was unable to offer any AP courses. So Baker took AP U.S. history and AP macro and micro economics through distance learning.

"I think it takes a student who's a little more of a self-starter who can learn independently," said Baker, who today is employed at the Belin and Blank Center for Gifted Education and Talented Development, which operates the state's Advanced Placement Academy at the University of Iowa. "While I didn't have a classroom teacher, I had the online teacher who was always available by e-mail," he said.

Baker may not have realized it at the time, but the teacher at the other end of the computer didn't work for the state of Iowa, but for Apex Learning, a Washington-based provider of distance learning curriculum used by schools in Iowa to provide AP courses. As a private vendor, Apex has provided digital instruction to more than 600,000 students in 4,500 school districts in the U.S. and 71 other countries since 1999.

Iowa chose Apex Learning to deliver AP courses in 2001. Since that time, the Iowa Online AP Academy program received a \$1.6 million state technology grant and another \$7 million in federal funds for the program, according to Clar Baldus, project administrator for the online academy. Schools pay nothing for students to enroll in online AP courses. Baldus said contracting with a private vendor to provide AP courses through distance learning was cheaper than building a program from scratch in 2001.

"The thing about Apex is that they are always updating things, technology-wise, College Board-wise," Baldus said. "And that saves us a lot of time and energy and money."

As in other states in which Apex provides online AP courses, the model in Iowa involves a number of people: instructors, hired by Apex but certified to teach in Iowa; site coordinators, who register school personnel and handle logistics such as registering students for AP exams and communicating with parents and the support team; and mentors, school personnel who meet with students and correspond with instructors.

Baldus attributes the high student success rate to the relationships with schools and the mentors in each school. Almost every high school in Iowa has registered to work with the online AP Academy, although fewer than half the state's 386 high schools had a student take one or more AP courses through distance learning last year.

—Tim Weldon